



Consumer Alert

Know Your Local Telephone Calling Area

Most of us place calls that are either local or long distance. Long distance calls are usually billed on a per-minute basis while local calls are made within a geographic area or exchange and have no costs beyond the monthly basic local exchange fee. But, how can you know whether a call you are about to place is local or long distance? Some telephone number prefixes (the first three digits of the seven-digit telephone number) may be familiar -- but others may not. New technology and other changes in the telecommunications industry are making things more confusing. The Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC) encourages you to know your local calling area to avoid unexpected long distance telephone charges.

Here are some examples of the confusion relating to local calling areas:

- ▶ Your computer modem can be programmed to auto-dial an Internet Service Provider's (ISP) telephone access number. But, a national or local ISP may not know your local calling area, and could assign you an access number to its network that is outside of your local calling area. Then, every time you log on to the Internet, you are charged for long distance calls. Or, your ISP's computer software may be programmed to automatically dial a backup number if the first one is busy. Although the primary access number may be local, the backup may be a long distance number.
- ▶ In the Detroit, Grand Rapids and Pontiac areas, calls that fall between local calling and long distance are billed as **zone calls**. These calls are billed on a per-minute basis, yet, unlike long distance calls, some zone calls don't need a "1" to be dialed before the seven-digit number. Telephone directories do not identify prefixes that are billed as zone calls.
- ▶ Some Michigan telephone customers are now able to change local telephone companies without changing their telephone number. However, different telephone companies may provide different local calling areas. A switch to a new company may result in a smaller or expanded local calling area.



- ▶ A call placed to a cellular telephone only one block away may be a long distance call if the cellular telephone's rate center is outside your local calling area.
- ▶ In some areas, a new area code is added to the same geographic area that is served by an existing area code. For example, while you retain the old area code, a new neighbor could receive the new area code. Once the new area code is in place, all customers will need to dial 10 digits to place a local call. These calls are still local and long distance charges will not apply.

What To Do

- ◆ To determine if a telephone number is within your local calling area, call your local telephone company and verify that the number is local. There is no charge for this call.
- ◆ AT&T's website, www.sbc.com/lca, provides a look-up guide to determine what numbers (prefixes) are included in a customer's local calling area. The site provides local calling area information for AT&T service territories and, depending on location, local calling area information for some non-AT&T areas.
- ◆ Monitor the calls your modem places to your ISP to verify they are within your local calling area. Make sure your modem doesn't automatically dial a second number you haven't verified when the primary access number is busy.
- ◆ ISPs periodically update their computer software. Make sure such updates do not change the access number(s) you use to connect to the ISP's network. Watch your screen as the computer modem dials the number to connect to the ISP. Make sure the

number that appears is the same local number you have selected.

- ◆ If you receive a compact disk (CD) in the mail or elsewhere from an ISP that offers a free trial for Internet service, make sure the telephone number programmed into the free computer software is within your local calling area.
- ◆ When someone gives you a cellular telephone number he or she can be reached at, ask what city the cellular service rate center is based from, and whether or not it will be a long distance call for you.
- ◆ As new technology and competition arrive in the telecommunications industry, it will be increasingly important to know your local calling area to avoid unexpected charges. Remember, telephone companies bill customers for any and all calls that are made on its network. Each customer is responsible for knowing what is and is not a local call.

